

A HISTORY OF MYSTICISM IN THE LAND OF FIRE

Probably the single most powerful event in the history of the evolution of human society was the domestication of fire. Prior to that momentous discovery that fire could be tamed and put to use, fire was perhaps the single most terrifying event in the life of humanity. Raging forest fires was the immediate consequence of lightning strikes, another terrifying phenomenon, and what could be more terrifying than a forest or brush fire, sweeping rapidly across the savannah, leaving utter destruction in its wake.

The idea that fire could be domesticated could only have occurred to those who happened to live nearby a fire that was under control and continuously burning so that the local paleolithic tribes could get accustomed to it, and even be so bold as to play with it. The only place on earth where this occurs is in the land called Azerbaijan, which means land of fire in Arabic. The gas deposits are so close to the surface that it continuously escapes at a slow pace, and since there is nothing around that can ignite, this is a fire that is not dangerous. It can be studied and even worshipped, as it was during the early fire worshippers' time.

An idea like domesticating fire will spread among humans like, well, wildfire. Soon it was used to frighten animals, to force large prey off precipices, to keep the predators away at night. For the first time in the history of animal life, the sense of safety appeared while some tribe sat around the fire. Cooking was not far behind, and so too the ancient tradition of storytelling.

At some point during the enjoyment of the novel and exquisite sensation of being safe, someone must have looked up at the night sky, and marveled at the endlessness. Soon, the rudiments of religion, philosophy and science were upon us. Animism must have got quite a boost from the condition of nighttime safety, when there was nothing to do after the meal but spook and delight each other with wild speculations for why things happened.

In any case, wherever there was domesticated fire, there was storytelling, and if the first instance of the taming of fire was in the southern Caucasus, in the Land of Fire, then they surely must have the oldest tradition of storytelling in the world.

Storytelling and mysticism go hand in hand. Fed by the magical flames sprouting from the ground around Burning Mountain (Yanar Dag), storytelling in the Land of Fire took on a mystical tone right from the beginning. Imagine standing around the low lying blue tinged flickering flames inexplicably emerging from the very earth, with occasional bursts of orange light and heat from a sudden release of trapped natural gas. They must have been entranced by the phenomenon. We sophisticated, modern, educated human beings, who know the science of fire, are still mesmerized by the sight of the ever burning spectacle of Yanar Dag in Azerbaijan. Imagine how our ancestors regarded such a unique place.

So it comes as no surprise that fire worshipping in the Caucasus attracted pilgrims from as far away as the land now called Hindustan, to personally witness a living miracle. The Land of Fire was a magnet for the mystical minded, and the cultural exchange that occurred made a major contribution to the development of society and human imagination all over Asia, and beyond.

One thousand years ago, relatively recently, a Persian mystic named Faruddin Attar wrote a small book called *Mantiq ut Tair*, roughly translated as Conference of the Birds. The text consists mostly of the conversations that one bird had with many other birds all different from one another, each representing some fundamental human trait, and their journey together to seek the advice of the great and wise Simurgh, which means, thirty birds.

Those who braved the journey got to meet the Simurgh, who dwells in the Caucasus, only to realize that the Simurgh was just a mirror in which they can perceive their own transformation. The mystical subtext aside, what should catch our attention is that the Caucasus, called Kavkaz by the locals, has been known throughout the Asian world as a mythical, mystical place. Even Jason set out for Kavkaz in search of a golden fleece.

To this day, the notion of a dervish, a person who is free of the worries of the everyday world, instead immersed in the mystical union with the All, and the notion of the Sufi, now associated with mystical Islam, are deeply woven into the fabric of everyday life in Azerbaijan. One of the most revered historical Azerbaijani figures is a Christ-like personality known as Nasimi, who volunteered to be skinned alive in order to save the life of someone else wrongly accused of being Nasimi. Sought out by the Islamic authorities for heresy and blasphemy, Nasimi had gone into hiding for many years, his own teacher and fellow disciples having been persecuted and killed for their unorthodox beliefs.

One of his most famous proclamations was, “Two worlds can fit in me, but I cannot fit into this world.” Most scholars have deconstructed his meaning to be an emphasis on a vivid self awareness as a cosmic being, with no real boundary between the self and the All. Those with a mystical nature would understand that Nasimi was offering the possibility that the human being is actually capable of being aware of the All directly through the bodily sensation of oneself as a living and conscious being.

Azerbaijan may be unique in this situation that arguably their most revered historical personality was the ultimate mystic philosopher, ready to sacrifice himself to protect the integrity of his beliefs in that second, mystical reality he felt himself to be equally a part of.

To this day, the idea of mysticism embodied in the personage of a unique being with unusual powers is an integral part of Azerbaijani culture and societal underpinnings. One prime contemporary remarkable personality was the man known as Sayeed Eshref. As a young boy, he was known to possess mystical gifts. Since he was partially paralyzed, the

interpretation is that the gift was somehow compensation for his disability. He was capable of healing others, but not himself.

There are many legends about Sayeed Eshref, and the first is the story about how a young girl he fancied when still a child himself, saw some birds in the tree branches, and suddenly said, "I wish I could have that bird." The young Eshref, who was still a child and could not have such a title as Sayeed, asked which bird she wanted, so she picked one out and pointed to it. Eshref pointed at the same bird which promptly fell down at his feet.

This episode was witnessed by several people, one of whom later on taught physics for thirty years at the Oil Institute in the capital, Baku. Rafiga Khanum, born in Aybasanli, a village outside of the town of Fizuli in western Azerbaijan, knew Eshref well and often witnessed inexplicable events associated with this strange and powerful figure.